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ABSTRACT

Fifty poverty-level Mexican American bilingual children in first and fourth grade were tested for verbal facility in both English and Spanish to determine which language was dominant at the initial grade level and an advanced grade level. An East Los Angeles almost all of its students lived in the same Federal Housing project, thus ensuring low income status and reasonable homogeneity in terms of language and culture. Students were individually given the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test in both English and Spanish by a bilingual member of the community who was not informed as to the purpose of the testing. Since some of the Spanish stimulus words were not meaningful for this particular region and dialect, bilingual educators from the community helped to substitute stimulus words for the less appropriate ones. If form A of the test were given in English, then form B was given in Spanish. This variable was counterbalanced as was the order of the language used. Results indicated there was no significant difference between verbal facility scores in English and Spanish at either the first or fourth grade level. This indicates that placement into bilingual programs without assessing language dominance may be a mistake. (Author/NQ)

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A COMPARISON OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH VERBAL FACILITY OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILDREN[1]

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1975

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Abstract

Fifty poverty-level Mexican-American bilingual children in first and fourth grade were tested for verbal facility in both English and Spanish to determine which language was dominant at the initial grade level and an advanced grade level. The results indicated there was no significant difference between verbal facility scores in English and Spanish at either the first of fourth grade level. This indicates that placement into bilingual programs without assessing language dominance may be a mistake.

With the increasing interest and investments in bilingual education for Mexican-American children, it is surprising that so little research has been conducted regarding language dominance for this population. It is often assumed that if a child has a Spanish-surname he or she is more proficient in Spanish than in English and then included in the bilingual program. Carrow (1971) did find that poverty-level Mexican-American kindergarteners and first-graders speak and understand Spanish with greater facility than English, but her conclusions were based upon observation rather than supportive data. In the only well controlled, experimental treatment of this question, Zimmerman et al. (1974) found that the majority of his large sample of Mexican-American preschoolers were fluent only in English, a large minority had basic fluency in both languages, and only about 16% were fluent only Spanish.

The purpose of this study was to compare English and Spanish verbal ability of bilingual first and fourth grade Mexican-American children to determine which language, if either, was dominant, and if there were a dominant language, was it more apparent at the earlier grade 1 or later at grade 4.

Method

The subjects were chosen by grade level and not by age, either from first or fourth grade from an elementary school in East Los Angeles, a predominantly Mexican-American community. The particular school was selected because almost all of its students live in the same Federal Housing project, thus ensuring low income status and reasonable homogeneity in terms of language and culture. A list was compiled of all of the first and fourth grade children in the school who were: 1) Spanish-surnamed; 2) Bilingual, in that the parents spoke little or no English and the children spoke primarily English in school; and 3) Had attended the school for at least one year. From that list, twenty-five children from each grade were randomly chosen.

The instrument chosen to measure degree of bilingualism was the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, in both English and Spanish. This test was selected because it requires no actual verbal response from the child and yet measures his or her knowledge of and ability to use words by requiring the child to recognize the correct picture from a series of four pictures after hearing a stimulus word. Although there is a Spanish version of this test, it was felt that some of the Spanish stimulus words would not be meaningful for this particular region and dialect. Therefore, new Spanish stimulus words were substituted for the less appropriate ones with the aid of bilingual educators from the community. Both form A and B were translated.

The children were tested individually by a bilingual member of the community who was not informed as to the purpose of the testing. The children were read the instructions in both English and Spanish, the order of which being randomly decided, and then the children were administered the test, both in English and in Spanish. If form A of the test were given in English, then form B of the test would be given in Spanish, and this variable was counterbalanced. Also counterbalanced was the order of presentation of the language. The two tests took a total of about fifteen minutes.

Results

The results of this study are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Using a t test for correlated groups, no significant difference was found between the verbal facility mean scores in English and Spanish for either the first grade or the fourth grade groups with $p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study tend to confirm Zimmerman's contention that poverty-level Mexican-American children speak and understand English and Spanish equally as a group at the early grade levels, and also that at a higher grade level this equality of verbal facility is sustained. It should not be inferred from these results that there is thus no need for bilingual education. Quite the contrary; for some of the children this approach is the only way in which they could have a fair chance of learning. What it does mean, however, is

that simply the presence of a Spanish-surname is no guarantee that the child is exclusively Spanish-speaking or even bilingual. Before a child is placed in a bilingual education program reasonable assurance should be had, through dominant language testing, that the child is indeed dominant in Spanish. Otherwise, classroom time might be better spent developing much needed English language skills and experiences to help future success in most English-dominated schools and work environments.

References

Carrow, E. Comprehension of English and Spanish by pre-school Mexican-American children. Modern Language Journal, 1971, 55, 299-306.

Zimmerman, I. L., Steiner, V. G., & Pond, R. L. Language status of preschool Mexican-American children—Is there a case against early bilingual education? Perceptual and Motor Skills, 1974, 38, 227-230.

TABLE 1.

Mean Verbal Facility Raw Scores— First Grade

Language	Mean Raw Score	Standard Deviation	t
English	38.92	4.94	.72
Spanish	37.66	6.89	

TABLE 1.

Mean Verbal Facility Raw Scores—Fourth Grade

Language	Mean Raw Score	Standard Deviation	t
English	57.42	6.02	.81
Spanish	54.17	5.78	

Footnote

1. The author wishes to express the deepest gratitude to Diane Ramos, Marylou Polistico, and Thomas McCarthy for their help in the necessary translations, and also to Morris Hamasaki, Area H Language Coordinator for the Los Angeles Unified School District for his assistance.